Deeper Meaning Within the Fellow Craft Degree

I have always wanted to be a Mason. From age seven when in preparation for the sacrament of First Holy Communion I knew that I would one day be initiated. It was at that early stage that my interest was piqued when Sister Jarlith Anne instructed the class as to the dangers of Protestant churches and Masonic Lodges. In her opinion they were so dangerous to us that should we encounter one along the way we should immediately cross the street and walk on the opposite side. I suppose that was to keep us at arms length from whatever the dangers were in her mind. She did me quite a favor, as her admonition did nothing but shore-up in my mind that there was something there that I was destined to know. It took many years for me to find my way to the door of the Lodge. Perhaps it is because of the long wait or the instilled need to know, that I was so enormously impressed, moved, and exhilarated with my Entered Apprentice degree. I will never forget my first words to Brother Jesse Riggs at the conclusion of my degree; “Jesse, somewhere in all of this is the lesson of how to effectively pray.” I pass on this trivial personal anecdote because it is in part the basis for my Masonic quest and what has driven me to search for the veiled secrets that I intuitively knew were there from the age of seven and partially found, but yet safely hidden beneath the outer layers of the Fellow Craft degree. I will herein share it with you for your acceptance or rejection, as you may choose.

Commonly, the second degree of Freemasonry is associated with the simple external growth of man, that being progression from youth to manhood. A fundamental examination of the Pythagorean theorem correlates symbolically with the same symbolic presentation and of course, much more. The objective here is to look more intensely beyond simplistic exoteric explanations, and to delve more thoroughly into the esoteric where an indication of the name of Deity is given as well as a symbolic representation of how to communicate with Him.

As the candidate advances to the second section of the degree, he is told that before him are the representations of the two brazen pillars which stood at the porch of King Solomon’s Temple. They are called by name and their respective properties detailed. By definition the candidate is still outside the Temple since he is only at the porch, and by definition he is still something of a profane since in the early Judaism of Solomon’s time the profane were confined to the outer wall of the Temple whereas only the purified were permitted to enter. We may take from this hint that the newly obligated Fellow Craft is not quite yet a Fellow Craft Mason. On passing the pillars he is then inside the Temple where historically only the purified were permitted to enter. We may take from this hint that the newly obligated Fellow Craft is not quite yet a Fellow Craft Mason. On passing the pillars he is then inside the Temple where historically only the purified could pass and enter. Thus, there is an implication that the candidate has in someway symbolically advanced to a more meaningful or purified state, perhaps being ESTABLISHED IN STRENGTH, and most assuredly in preparation for something that we may take to be either sacred, profound, or in someway temporally meaningful. Insomuch as he is on his way to the Middle Chamber by way of the winding staircase, which Dr. Mackey indicates was connected to the next Higher Chamber; we can assume that whatever he is to obtain in the Middle Chamber must be preparatory to entering the Higher Chamber.

Once inside the Fellow Craft is then confronted with the winding staircase curiously comprised of 3, 5, and 7 steps to the Middle Chamber all of which, importantly total 15 steps, historically a sacred
number in Pythagorean philosophy where the square of 3 equals 9 and when written in diagrammatic form of nine digits with the 3, 5, and 7, steps written as the middle sequence created the Pythagorean talisman which vertically, horizontally, and obliquely always total 15, i.e.

8—1—6 (Higher Chamber)
3—5—7 (Middle Chamber)
4—9—2 (Inside the Porch)

He is told that he must ascend the staircase of 15 steps whence it is implied that he earns his reward, indeed the wages of a Fellow Craft Mason.

As he ascends the staircase, which is apparently helical and must have in itself a special meaning, the description of the three-stationed officers is tendered him. With a modicum of effort the stationed officers can be extrapolated to represent the growth levels of man from youth to adulthood to old age. Somewhat more deeply they can be said to represent the Entered Apprentice as a mere physical laborer, a Fellow Craft as an intelligent thinking man, and the combination or square of those two qualities combining to represent the spiritual aspect of man. Further speculation on this line of thought is easily found in the contemplation of the 47th Problem of Euclid, which will continually evolve from a mere theorem of geometrical fact to an illustration of the degrees of Masonry, to a replication of the Point Within A Circle evidencing in an early rendition the story of Isis, Osiris, and Horus, up to more modern applications and insights.

Beyond the first three steps the candidate encounters a series of five steps, which are equated to the five senses of man. It is through these senses that man derives his sensory input regarding knowledge of the material world, and this too is aptly tendered to the candidate.

Next come the series of seven steps, which are enumerated as the seven basic arts and sciences including grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. In the 21st Century these constitute a woefully abbreviated list, but inclusiveness is not the point of the allegory there given. Symbolically, they represent the call for man to enhance his mind and his ability to think and analyze. They are a meaningful application in harmony with the general tenets of the degree of Fellow Craft representing the intelligent man. Only when they are taken in the context of the totality of all 15 steps does the deeper meaning begin to unfold.

Collectively, the stairway lecture implies the life cycle of man from youth to old age and, his physical, intellectual, and spiritual development. It illustrates the means by which he gathers data, and also gives examples of material, which his mind is to distill in order that he becomes an intelligent thinking man, the very definition of a Fellow Craft Mason. The means through which all this temporal development occurs is self evident in the exoteric lecture attendant to each sequence of steps. What is curiously absent is overt reference to his spirituality, which is not given except in general terms in the “G” lecture. Nonetheless, a most profound and secret spiritual communication is evident beneath the surface. But, before we can speculate on the meaning there is still more to be told to the candidate, which helps to further elucidate the secret contained therein.

Before arriving at his destination, that being the Middle Chamber he endeavors to attract the attention of the Junior Warden where the appropriate password is given. Of the greatest importance
is the paraphrastic translation reference from the Vulgate by Albert Mackey, which tells us that the password means “an ear of corn” and which, in the Hebrew is translated from the root word ShaBaL, as meaning a rapid stream of water or “to flow copiously.” Both definitions have tremendous significance on our exploration of deeper meaning although as many studies of Roslyn Chapel have suggested, “corn was a new world plant and was not therefore from a botanical perspective, known in the old world cultures. Therefore, the first definition as “an ear of corn” is perhaps up for debate depending on the archetype from which one derives his point of origin for the Craft. Irrespective of the presence of corn during the guild period or earlier times it is the signification that will stir greater interest as we proceed. The password is exchanged and then there is presented to his mind the image of a shaft of wheat suspended from a tree limb alongside a stream of water and occasionally in some jurisdictions, with an adjacent waterfall. In the translation offered above the root word ShaBaL is also taken to mean a “waterfall” denoting an emblem of “plenty.” This meaning is also of greatest significance.

As the dialogue exchanges, there is great emphasis placed on the lack of ability in articulating that certain word. Further, there is serious dialogue regarding the demise of the children of Ammon and later the Ephraimites by the Gileadites who “took the passages of the Jordan.” This story, cumbersome to most brethren, is allegorical of the wresting of control between the respective components of the human being, which we might say are the sub-conscious, conscious, and supra-conscious selves. I will shortly share the contentions of the selves offered by Max Freedom Long in his studies of Hawaiian Theology as an integral part of the discovered secret of this degree.

We may take the Gileadites to represent the supra-conscious aspect man, the Ephraimites as the consciousness of man, and the children of Ammon as the subconsciousness of man. As the scriptural passage unfolds for the candidate one takes control over another and another until the strongest part man is in control thusly, represented by the Gileadites who ultimately “control the passages of the Jordan.” The Jordan being the same copiously flowing river, where John the Baptist baptized or initiated Jesus into His own teachings. It clearly meshes well with the definition of the password given at the station of the Junior Warden. Controlling the passages of the Jordan is to control the flow of powerful energy as will shortly become clearer.

The conclusion of the second section or staircase lecture ends in the Middle Chamber where the candidate earns his reward, the wages of a Fellow Craft Mason, those being Corn, Wine, and Oil. Curious wages indeed! Some speculate this representation to mean that the Fellow Craft in the operative period was provided with the simple means to sustain his physical life. Such an explanation has little or no value to the Mason and should be immediately suspect on the basis of so simple an exoteric meaning. The deeper meanings of the Fellow Craft degree, both allegorical and symbolic can only be appreciated when taken collectively.

In his first three steps the candidate’s attention is drawn to the progressions of the life cycle, the hierarchy of temporal life, along with a geometrical allusion to his very own life component, those consisting of his physical burden-bearing self, his intellectual capacity, and his spiritual being.

Through the means of the next five steps he is made aware of how he gathers knowledge and awareness of his external world, those being his five senses.

The last seven steps suggest to the candidate the areas of interest that should occupy his mind in
order that he develop his intellectual capacities, capacities quite necessary to him if he is to succeed in his Masonic quest, that of seeking out Divine Truth. On mastering such skill-sets the Fellow Craft is then prepared to understand the messages conveyed in the degree in spite of their shrouded nature.

Initially we must consider the mystical nature of the number 15 in the context of Freemasonry sharing much of the Hebrew mystery content from more ancient times. The first order of business then, is to correlate the numerology with the Hebrew alphabet. Royal Arch Masons will readily recognize that relationship. Although there may indeed be other alphanumeric correlations, the more readily apparent is that of the component 10 correlating to our letter “J” or the Hebrew “Y” or yod. This will have immediate recognitions of importance to Scottish Rite Masons of the 14th degree. The component 5 correlates to the Hebrew letter for “H.” As the Hebrew alphabet is devoid of vowels we are free to add accordingly. Assuming that we include a letter “A” we would then conclude JAH, which is the first time in York Rite Masonry prior to the Royal Arch that the name or partial name of Deity is divulged to the candidate, albeit in the most abstruse manner. The letter “A” was arbitrarily chosen. However, one could just as easily select any vowel and achieve the same essential phonetic by using either the long or short sound of the vowel, i.e. jah, jeh, jih, joh, juh.

By itself the preceding numerology and interpretation may be mere coincidence, though the author doubts coincidence exists anywhere within the rituals. However, to lend credence to the alphanumeric finding one must establish a rationale for why the name of Deity would be included within the ritual content in the first place since a more generic representation is given in the “G” lecture following the exit from the Middle Chamber. It is necessary to consider certain Theosophical tenets held by other schools of belief and understanding. In this instance the theology of the Hawaiians provides some helpful insight.

Max Freedom Long was the foremost author and researcher of Hawaii’s theology. For lack of a known name Long referred to the Hawaiian theology as Huna. Claiming an ancient derivation of Huna back to the earliest times of Egypt, which may be fact or fiction as it is based solely on anecdotal renditions of Hawaiian legend, Long, described the Huna practice of formulating prayer. In an abbreviated version here, the Huna method of prayer is:

1. Visualization of the prayer as a seed-form,
2. Meticulous crafting of the wording of the seed-form prayer,
3. Careful planting of the prayer within the divine consciousness, which he called the Higher Self and which seems to correlates well to the concept of supra-consciousness,
4. Precise repetition of the prayer on a regular basis,
5. Generation of nutrient for the supra-consciousness (“High Self”) so as to be able to act upon the prayer request. (Long, informs us that the Huna method for this is through a regulated breathing, which is to occur in sets of four sequential breaths at a time. This is certainly a common concept of clearing the mind and bringing it to stillness, and is to be found in many Eastern religions, Yoga, and various forms of meditation.)
6. Lastly, persistence and fortitude in maintaining the prayer to fruition exactly as the petitioner originally formed it. Long called this repetitiousness “thought form clusters.”

Although the Huna method offered by Long is rather mechanical it is not so far from the methods employed in Western Christianity where we find biblical instructions to “be still and know that I am
God,” “pray ceaselessly,” and repetitiousness in prayer, as in the Catholic use of the Rosary.

Returning to the Fellow Craft degree, we find these very components presented to the candidate first at the station of the Junior Warden where the shaft of suspended wheat is clearly representational of the thought form cluster or clusters of prayer as seed in grain form. Further, we find the suspended shaft overhanging a flowing stream. Recall that prayer needs nourishing and thus the seedling prayer symbolically receives watering readily, as represented by the adjacent stream. It is also widely held that prayers should “flow to the Father as freely as water.” Recall that the translation of the password also means, “to flow copiously.” Thus we now have the first veiled indication and rationale of why the name of Deity is part of the Fellow Craft’s reward. Recall also, that the allegorical meaning of the scriptural passage implies a taking of control by the supra-conscious self or spiritual self of the candidate. It is an allegory for man’s spiritual identity to prevail over his physical and intellectual identity.

It is in the Middle Chamber that the candidate is given the wages of the Fellow Craft, those being corn, wine, and oil. How cleverly disguised is the formulation of the prayer method! Remember that the password also translated to mean “an ear of corn.”

Taking each component of the Fellow Craft’s wages separately, we find that corn is indeed just another version of a seed and thusly, representational of the prayer as the single thought or as the cluster of prayers, each identical to the other. Here we again have a precise representation of the “thought form cluster.” It is most relevant to recall that Huna dictates exacting repetitiousness of the thought form prayer while Western Christianity reminds us to pray ceaselessly. Both corn and wheat are represented as the individual kernel or grain and symbolically, single thought form prayers, as well as cluster forms as the ear of corn or the shaft of wheat meaning a thought form cluster or the repetitious prayer formed and offered “ceaselessly.”

Wine is the second component, and as we consider the properties of wine we find it to be constituted of water, sugar, and alcohol. Water is essential to the germination of the seed and so is symbolically the nutrient of the prayer nurtured to fruition. Sugar is one of the two absolute nutrients for the functioning of the human brain, that human organs responsible for our intellectual functioning, i.e., thinking, extrapolated to thoughtful formulation of prayer. Alcohol is a central nervous system depressant and as such tends to still the mind. It is essentially anesthetic. The symbolism here is that wine represents that biblical admonition to “be still and know that I am God” or simply a tool to assist in quieting the mind in preparation for prayerful communication with Deity. Wine therefore is an important symbol comprising several components important to the understanding of the hidden secret of the degree.

The final component of wages includes oil. From the most ancient of records we know that oil has been used in anointing or consecrating something as holy and pleasing to God. It is indeed part of Masonic ritual as well as a key component in conferring certain sacramental Rites such as Ordination, Confirmation, and the Last Rights. It is a part of Masonic consecration of newly instituted Lodges and may well be incorporated into Masonic degrees to which, this writer has not yet earned admittance. The proffered argument that it was a part of the operative Fellow Craft’s wages as a physical means of light and cooking etc. and is useless and absurd when considering the degree in this most profound context. Clearly, it is an indication that the prayerful petitioner must bless, nay more than that, he must consecrate each prayer lest its hallowedness is lost in the
offering process. Oil certainly fulfills this requirement!

As we peek beneath the simple exoteric terms of the Fellow Craft degree we begin to realize its importance well beyond the superficial scope of the stationed officers, lessons on senses already known, and subjects of study more appropriate to mere academia. There is much more in biblical history recitations than a simple story of warring tribes from a long lost epoch. It becomes clear that the veiled mystery is about the tiers of human life, growth, development, and a strenuous life process, the purpose of which is to achieve Divine Truth. In symbolic form we are given the components of meaningful prayer, the method of precise formulation, the need for prayerful repetition, the quieted mind, the requirements for nourishing our prayers through to success, and, most importantly, the indication of the symbolic name of Deity to whom prayer is communicated.

The intensity of this imbedded secret is so great as to raise into question the legitimacy of man’s need for anyone else to intervene on his behalf in his attempt and desire to seek Divine Truth and communion with his Creator. How curious that my initial attraction to the Order so many years ago was in preparation for my First Holy Communion!

Selected Bibliography:

1. Mackey, Albert G., Symbolism of Freemasonry, it’s Science and Philosophy, it’s Legends, Myths, and Symbols, Clark and Maynard, New York, 1882.